

# MANAGING CREDIT

You may have lost your credit cards and financial records, and now, need money for the basics, as well as rebuilding, repairing, or paying some bills. Here is important information about managing your credit — and making sure you benefit from the use of your credit and charge cards:

- ✓ Ask for short-term loans for living expenses or increases in your credit limits or cash advance limits until you get insurance or disaster relief funds.
- ✓ Call your utility companies, including your wireless telephone services, and financial institutions to make sure they know you have lost your belongings in the hurricane. When you call, ask them to waive their fees and allow you to defer your payments, or put you on a different payment schedule.
- ✓ Call your banks and credit unions. Ask them to waive ATM fees, overdraft fees, and their reporting on your overdrafts to the credit reporting companies. Ask them to waive any penalties on early withdrawal of certificates of deposit.
- ✓ Call your credit card companies. If it is possible, change your billing address to your temporary address. Ask if you can defer or skip some payments in the short-term, and for a different payment schedule in the long term. Ask them to waive late fees, over-limit and other fees, and any increased interest rates. If you need it, ask for an increased credit limit or cash advance limit. And ask them to waive reporting any delinquency to the credit reporting companies.
- ✓ For your mortgage, auto, or other loans: ask to defer your payments for several months. Some companies have already announced a policy to do that. Ask them to waive any late fees and any reporting of delinquencies to the credit reporting companies. And ask for an extension on your loan to reduce your payments until you are back on more solid financial footing.

Of course, asking for a fee waiver or change in the terms and conditions of your account doesn't guarantee that a company will agree to it. Company policies and legal obligations can vary.

### **BE ON THE LOOK OUT**

Once recovery mode begins, be wary of:

- Trucks driving door to door, claiming to be doing work for your neighbors. Deal with contractors from your community.
- Anyone who asks for cash payment for their services.
- Papers that are confusing. Don't sign them if you can't understand them. Find someone else to do business with.
- Promises to solve all your problems. They may be tempting, and you may wish they were true, but no one can solve all the problems the disaster has brought.

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## **IN THE COMING MONTHS**

If it will take several months before you can make payments on your credit cards, you may want to be in touch with the National Foundation for Credit Counseling, a group that offers consumer credit counseling services. NFCC is located in Silver Spring, Maryland, but consumers can call 1-800-388-2227, its toll-free number, to locate member offices. The website is [www.nfcc.org](http://www.nfcc.org)

## **DAMAGED OR LOST DOCUMENTS**

It is important to replace any legal documents that have been damaged or lost. Among those documents that should be replaced — and the contacts — are:

Deeds and recorded real estate documents: County's Recorder of Deeds

Mortgages and other credit: Lender or financial company

Leases: Landlord or financial company

Insurance policies: Insurance company/agent

Wills: Attorney. If the will is destroyed, you'll need another.

Checks/Passbook Savings book/Investment materials: Bank, investment company, or your broker.

Auto Title/Drivers License: Secretary of State or Department of Motor Vehicles

Birth Certificate: Vital Statistics Office from county where person was born.

Social Security Card: local Social Security Administration Office

Tax Returns: IRS Center

Other important documents, such as contracts or divorce judgments: Attorney or the court

A very important document to have at this time is your credit report because it lists all your creditors. Everyone is entitled to one free credit report every 12 months from each of the three national credit reporting companies. Log on to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com) or call, toll-free, 1-877-322-8228 for your free credit report. If you have already gotten your free credit report this year from each of the companies, you may have to pay for another copy — but it won't cost more than \$9.50.